

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## A Karaite Hakham Kolel and a Hebrew Poet : Zerah ben Nathan in a New World

Tuori, Riikka

de Gruyter  
2019-07

---

Tuori , R 2019 , A Karaite Hakham Kolel and a Hebrew Poet : Zerah ben Nathan in a New World . in J Yeshaya , E Hollender & N Katsumata (eds) , The Poet and the World : Festschrift for Wout van Bekkum on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday . Studia Judaica 107 , de Gruyter , Berlin/Boston , pp. 135 158 . <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110599237-010>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/317201>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110599237-010>

---

acceptedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

Riikka Tuori

# A Karaite *Hakham Kolel* and a Hebrew Poet: Zeraḥ ben Nathan in a New World

## 1 Introduction

In modern research, Karaite Jews are often viewed, discussed, and scrutinized against their relationship with the Jewish mainstream—rabbinic Jews. Through centuries of survival as a minority form of Judaism, Karaites did adjust some of their ideas and traditions to conform to certain rabbinic standards, but they did so without losing their distinctive identity.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Karaite *halakha* is often of interest due to its “deviations” from rabbinic *halakha*, and Karaite customs are worth mentioning due to their divergences from rabbinic *minhagim*.<sup>2</sup> Even certain Karaite individuals have roused attention, not because of the individuals themselves, but because of their relationship with someone more prominent from among the folds of mainstream Judaism.

A case in point is the chief personality of this article, the Lithuanian Karaite Zeraḥ ben Nathan (ca. 1578–1657/8),<sup>3</sup> whose intellectual musings helped to inspire the Rabbanite scholar and polymath, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo of Candia (1591–1655).<sup>4</sup> The ephemeral rise of Zeraḥ ben Nathan to fame owes to his correspondence over scientific questions with Delmedigo, published by the latter in

---

1 On such renewals in the fifteenth-century Byzantine Empire, including the use of candles on the Sabbath, see Daniel Frank, “Karaite Exegetical and Halakhical Literature in Byzantium and Turkey,” in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Studies*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 550–52.

2 This trend has been pointed out by Yoram Erder, “Daily prayer times in Karaite *halakha* in light of the times of Islamic prayers,” *Revue des études juives* 153 (1994): 5–6. For a comparison of Karaite customs mainly with rabbinic ones, see, e.g. Percy Selvin Goldberg, *Karaite Liturgy and its Relation to Synagogue Worship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957).

3 On the life of Zeraḥ ben Nathan, see Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1930), 726–32, and, more recently, Golda Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness, Haskalah, and Nationalism among the Karaites of Eastern Europe* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018), 84–90.

4 On the life and works of Delmedigo, see Isaac Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo: His Life, Works and Times* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); on his scientific relevance among early modern Jews, see Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66–81; on his contacts with the Lithuanian Karaites, see Stefan Schreiner, “Josef Schelomo Delmedigos Aufenthalt in Polen-Litauen,” in *An der Schwelle zur Moderne: Juden in der Renaissance*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 207–32; Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 84–90.

his scientific compendium *Sefer elim* (*The Book of Elim*).<sup>5</sup> Through Delmedigo's influence, Zerah can be counted among the best-known Karaites of his time,<sup>6</sup> and no study on Delmedigo can omit his role.

However, researchers fascinated by the intellectual complexity of Delmedigo have tended to underplay the role of his Karaite correspondent. In his study on the life and works of Delmedigo, Isaac Barzilay assumes that the real author of the scientific queries published in *Sefer elim*—or, rather, the mind behind the literary project—was Delmedigo, not Zerah.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, in terms of academic merit, the Lithuanian Karaite from the small town of Troki can hardly compete with Delmedigo, a scion of a family of scholars and a graduate of medicine from the distinguished University of Padua.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the traditionally esteemed characteristics of prodigies—innovativeness, acumen, and productivity—Zerah did not enjoy the same advantages and privileges as his rabbinic correspondent.

Nevertheless, by more closely focusing on his life and works, Zerah ben Nathan may turn out to be more than an ephemeral side character outshone by a greater man. Zerah authored at least two literary works that have never appeared in print, but more remarkably, he published dozens of Hebrew poems. Discussing his style as a poet, I will try to analyze his personality, shaped as it was by his particular societal and historical surroundings. My approach is inspired by Delmedigo's courteous use of the title *hakham kolel* ("a comprehensive schol-

---

5 First edition in Amsterdam, 1629, second edition in Odessa (M. E. Belinsohn), 1864–1865. For the three letters of Zerah and his twelve questions and seventy minor queries, see *Sefer elim*, 1–40 (pages refer to the 2nd edition). The title of the book refers to Exod 15:27, where Elim is a camping site of the Israelites with twelve springs of water and seventy palm-trees.

6 In addition to Zerah, two other Lithuanian Karaites, Josiah ben Judah and Ezra ben Nisan, also corresponded with Delmedigo; Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 70–71; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 676. Josiah ben Judah inspired Delmedigo to write the tractate *Ner elohim* (*The Candle of God*) on theological topics, which Delmedigo would also include in *Sefer elim* (pp. 75–93).

7 Barzilay (*Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 73–74) notes: "From all the evidence pertaining to Zerah it is obvious that he was by no means a man of either great knowledge or ability, and it is most unlikely that Yashar [Delmedigo's acronym] undertook any of his inquiries to satisfy Zerah's curiosity." On Delmedigo's many pseudonyms, see Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 153; Jeremy A. Pfeffer, "Authorship in a Hebrew Codex ...MS 199: Tracing two lost works by Delmedigo," *Christ Church Library Newsletter* 6/3 (2010): 1–6.

8 On his (Ashkenazic and/or Italian) genealogy, see Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 25–28. On Jewish medical students at the University of Padua, see David Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David Ruderman (New York-London: New York University Press, 1992), 519–55, Kenneth Collins, "Jewish Medical Students and Graduates at the Universities of Padua and Leiden: 1617–1740," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 4/1 (2013): without pagination, DOI 10.5041/RMMJ.10103.

ar”) to address his Karaite correspondent.<sup>9</sup> By the late fifteenth century, this honorific had become the Jewish version of the “universal man” (*l’uomo universale*) of Renaissance humanism. In the Italian Jewish context familiar to Delmedigo, *ḥakham kolel* referred to an educated man in the possession of two (often opposing) branches of wisdom: thorough knowledge of Jewish (i.e. rabbinic) tradition and proficiency in the secular sciences. Invigorated by Renaissance ideals, the *ḥakham kolel* was a “wise man who was well versed in the liberal arts, the *studia humanitatis*, philosophy and medicine, as much as he was erudite in rabbinic tradition”,<sup>10</sup> and, in short, “the ideal Jewish scholar.”<sup>11</sup> The title also implied that the individual possessed the ideal moral characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Delmedigo’s use of the title *ḥakham kolel* was a polite mode of addressing scholarly associates in his cultural framework, and it did not necessarily reflect what he thought about the actual characteristics of the man addressed. Nevertheless, the title does well in describing Zerah and his goals as a Jewish scholar. In this article, then, I will examine the poetry of a Karaite scholar who—in certain contexts—could be considered as a *ḥakham kolel*: a man who strove to be a versatile thinker both in his own tradition and in the secular sciences of his day.<sup>13</sup> I will discuss his life with the help of selected citations from his poems,

9 See Delmedigo’s letter *Ahuz* in Abraham Geiger, *Melo ḥofnayim* (*Two Fistfuls*) (Berlin: L. Fernbach, 1840), 1. In the version of the letter published in *Sefer elim* (p. 126), this honorific is missing; however, elsewhere in *Sefer elim* (p. 40), it is given to a mysterious friend of Delmedigo, Moses Metz, and Zerah is there referred to as a “perfect wise man and a philosopher” (החכם השלם הפילוסוף). In later Karaite sources, Zerah continues to be referred to with the honorific *ḥakham kolel*, see, e.g., the heading preceding one of his poems in the Karaite *Siddur* printed in 1892; *Siddur ha-tefillot ke-minhag ha-qara’im*, vol. IV (Vilna 1892), 163. On the problematic history of *Ahuz*, see n. 32 below.

10 Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds: The Life and Thought of Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 18.

11 Gianfranco Miletto, “David ben Abraham and Abraham Provenzani,” in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, eds. David Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 133.

12 The Italian dream interpreter Shlomo Almoli (ca. 1485–1542) describes the concept in the context of perfect people (*anashim shelemim*) cleaving to universal wisdom (*sekhel kolel*): “[b]y means of this universal wisdom one can become a *ḥakham kolel*, a universal scholar [...]”; Annelies Kuyt, “With One Foot in the Renaissance: Shlomoh Almoli and his Dream Interpretation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999): 216.

13 The title appears in Karaite use when referring to physicians and to other admired men. For example, the famous Dutch publisher Menasseh Ben Israel (1604–1657) is referred to as *ḥakham kolel* in Ms. Evr. II A 161–9 (Firkovich archives in Saint Petersburg), in a copy of Joseph ben Mordecai Malinowski’s Kabbalistic work *Ha-elef lekha* (“You may have the thousand”, from Song 8:12, fols. 10a-b).

and then offer first publications and English translations of two previously unpublished Hebrew poems by him, one *baqqasha* and one *zemer* for Purim. I will investigate what made him unique in his community and in his contemporary East European Jewish culture, evaluating his Karaite identity in his image as a poet and a scholar.

## 2 Zeraḥ ben Nathan: The Life of a Struggling Intellectual

Born in 1578, Zeraḥ lived in Troki, a few kilometers west of Vilna. Zeraḥ's parents lived in Birže (Biržai), a town located in northern Lithuania.<sup>14</sup> By this time, Troki had become a significant center for East European Karaites as part of the recently formed Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), where Karaites lived in northern Lithuania, southern Galicia, and Volhynia.<sup>15</sup>

Zeraḥ provides a short biography and the names of his early teachers in his letter quoted on the first page of Delmedigo's *Sefer elim*. As a young boy, Zeraḥ was the protégé of two prominent Karaite scholars, Isaac ben Abraham of Troki (1533–1594), the author of *Ḥizzuq emuna*,<sup>16</sup> and Joseph ben Mordecai Malinowski of Birže (d. c. 1624).<sup>17</sup> He mourns the death of his first teacher, Isaac, elegiacally citing the Psalms:<sup>18</sup>

---

14 Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 574–75. Less is known about other potential family members. Unlike the later Karaite poet from Troki, Solomon ben Aaron (1670–1745), who inserted the names of his children into the acrostics of his poems, Zeraḥ apparently only used his own name. Perhaps this style had not yet become fashionable, or perhaps his poems with the names of his family members have disappeared. In general, Karaite authors only begin mentioning the names of their wives, mothers, and daughters in their poems after Zeraḥ's time. In any case, letters written by Zeraḥ and preserved in the Firkovich Collections might reveal more about his background.

15 Troki kept its high status until the attack of the Muscovites in 1654–1655, which left it devastated; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 565.

16 *The Strengthening of Faith*, a famous polemic against Christianity; on Isaac ben Abraham and his works, see Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 64–77.

17 Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 727–28; Abraham Geiger, *Isaak Troki* (Breslau: Kern, 1853), 43–44; Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 78–81. The identity of a third teacher mentioned by Zeraḥ, Judah ben Aaron, is uncertain. Zeraḥ held his teachers in high regard, and in 1629, asked Menasseh Ben Israel, the publisher of *Sefer elim*, to publish Isaac ben Abraham's *Ḥizzuq emuna* and Malinowski's prayer *Ha-elef lekha* (printed eventually in 1642/3); Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 726–30, 1227.

18 *Sefer elim*, 4.

דְּמִיתִי לְקֹאת מְדָבֵר בִּי אֶבֶד מְנוּס מִמְּנִי אֵין דּוֹרֵשׁ לְנַפְשִׁי

I am like a great owl in the wilderness (Ps 102:7) as no refuge remains for me; no one cares for my soul (Ps 142:5).

Influenced by these scholars from a young age, Zerah nursed an abiding interest to acquire more knowledge, which he cultivated alongside an uncompromising piety in Karaite Judaism.

The life of Zerah ben Nathan coincides with many major developments of early modern East European history. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Jews of Eastern Europe, Karaites and Rabbanites alike, experienced societal upheavals and ideological revolutions boosted by the ideas and developments of the epoch.<sup>19</sup> With the spread of the printing press and easier accessibility to new sources of knowledge, the authorities faced unforeseen challenges. In the fraught decades of the sixteenth century, the Reformation had upended the Christian order on the European continent, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, too, was shaken by various religious conflicts, reformations, and counter-reformations. For the Lithuanian Karaites, these changes would launch a period of self-reflection, as Christian scholars began to view the Karaite-Rabbanite dispute as a Jewish version of the Catholic-Protestant conflict. Their curiosity resulted in several historiographies written from the Karaite point of view in the ensuing decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> Troki experienced its share of upheavals, as did any other town in the area. Followers of various Christian factions, Unitarianists, Calvinists, and Jesuits, each vied for the position of utmost religious authority. Unlike in most municipalities of Poland-Lithuania, in Troki, Karaites formed the majority of the Jewish community, while Ashkenazic Jews remained in the minority. Often, Christian parties contacted the local Karaites as the main representatives of Judaism, likely strengthening the Karaite identity of the community in Troki.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For a concise history of the major cultural developments of the era among European Jewry, see David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 680; Paul Fenton, "The European Discovery of Karaism in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3–8; Johannes van den Berg, "Proto-Protestants? The Image of the Karaites as a Mirror of the Catholic-Protestant Controversy in the Seventeenth Century," in *Jewish-Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century: Studies and Documents*, eds. Johannes van den Berg and Ernestine van der Wall (Dordrecht-Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 33–49.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, "Josef Schelomo Delmedigos Aufenthalt in Polen-Litauen," 225.

Following the example of previous Karaite generations,<sup>22</sup> Zerah had been fascinated with the sciences, long before he met Delmedigo. In 1618, Zerah, approaching his fortieth year, travelled to Constantinople, staying in the cosmopolitan city for two years and studying various topics with local Karaites.<sup>23</sup> How this extended journey was sponsored remains a mystery. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land via Turkey and visits between the communities, at any rate, were a common practice among Lithuanian Karaites.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps then, the journey satisfied his academic aspirations, and the Karaite community in Troki in appreciation of his scholarly contributions to the community may have financed Zerah's journey. In any case, as he was engaging in activities that required spare time, Zerah must have been a man of means—perhaps a merchant, or a leaser of properties—with access to sufficient funds.

On a smaller scale, Constantinople became for the middle-aged Zerah what Padua had been for the young Delmedigo, and, after he returned to his native land, the lack of intellectual company constantly troubled him. He would entertain correspondence with his southern acquaintances for the rest of his life. Almost twenty years after his visit, approximately in 1637, he received a letter from the Turkish Karaite Joseph ben Moses Maruli (Constantinople, seventeenth century).<sup>25</sup> While Zerah's original letter has not been preserved, from Maruli's letter it becomes clear that Zerah had asked him to send books to Lithuania, but Maruli could not fulfill these wishes, mainly for economic reasons. A bibliophile, albeit with gaps in his collection, Zerah was, as Mann has noted, "practically a self-taught man."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Attaining a certain level of (medieval) scientific education was espoused already in earlier Karaite halakhic works, and, in the ten principles of Karaite faith, the obligation of knowing the sacred sources includes the possession of scientific knowledge; see Daniel Lasker, "Medieval Karaism and Science," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 435.

<sup>23</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 676–78. In his second question on astronomy, Zerah describes his studies in Constantinople, including readings in *Almagest* by Ptolemy (ca. 100–160 CE) and his later Muslim commentators; *Sefer elim*, 18–20; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 729.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 588–89, 621.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 689; 729–30; 1223–25. The most notable member of the Maruli family in Constantinople was Judah Maruli (d. 1593), the author of the poetic work *Qol Yehuda* (*The Voice of Judah*); on the Maruli family, see Abraham Danon, "The Karaites in European Turkey: Contributions to Their History Based Chiefly on Unpublished Documents," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 15/3 (1925): 315–17. On Delmedigo and Judah's grandson, Moses Messorodi (1560–1637), meeting in Constantinople, see Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 57–58.

<sup>26</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 728.

In the early 1620s, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo entered Zeraḥ's life with now-famous results. A native of Crete (Candia) and a trained physician, Delmedigo had been travelling through Italy, Turkey, and Egypt, when Prince Krzysztof Radziwiłł II (1585–1640) invited him to Poland in 1620.<sup>27</sup> During his medical service at the royal court, Delmedigo stayed in Vilna, where the Karaites of Troki initiated an exchange of letters with him.<sup>28</sup> Zeraḥ, who had only just returned from his spell in Constantinople and thus had a renewed thirst for knowledge, authored twelve letters posing questions on different branches of science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, theology, and Kabbalah, which together with Delmedigo's replies form the bulk of *Sefer elim*.<sup>29</sup> At the time of their correspondence, Zeraḥ was forty-two years old, and Delmedigo thirteen years his junior. Despite this age gap, Zeraḥ held Delmedigo in high regard, as evidenced by his poetically formulated praises of him in the letters published in *Sefer elim*.<sup>30</sup> For his part, Delmedigo was more than content to engage in discussion with his Karaite contacts: from his multicultural viewpoint, the Lithuanian Karaites seemed warm and hospitable to his ideas, especially when compared to the hostile attitudes of local Ashkenazic Jews towards any non-religious study.<sup>31</sup> In his letter *Aḥuz*,<sup>32</sup> Delmedigo even criticizes the Talmud, discouraging Zeraḥ from studying it; in his opinion, Talmudic *pilpul* had taken too much of the time of Ashkenazic Jews rendering them averse to the secular sciences.

<sup>27</sup> Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 42–44.

<sup>28</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 612.

<sup>29</sup> Barzilay, *Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the alphabetic poem אולם אני אדרוש ("But as for me, I would seek", *Sefer elim*, 39–40), where Zeraḥ eagerly anticipates Delmedigo's teachings: / לשון לשורר לך למלל לעלות ("Raising my tongue to utter poems for you, / learning to teach the core of your instruction").

<sup>31</sup> Schreiner, "Josef Schelomo Delmedigos Aufenthalt," 217–18; Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 69–70.

<sup>32</sup> See the version of the letter in Geiger, *Melo ḥofnayim*, 5, 13–14; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 677. In addition to the shorter version in *Sefer elim* (126–35), there are two Karaite versions of the letter *Aḥuz*, both preserved in Karaite archives: one in Isaac ben Solomon's (1755–1826) *Pinnat yiqrat* (*Precious cornerstone*), published by his son Abraham ben Yosef Shelomo Lutzki (Gozlow, 1834, without pagination), and another in *Melo ḥofnayim*, by Abraham Geiger (Berlin, 1840), 1–28. These versions differ from that printed in *Sefer elim*, because the publisher, Menasseh Ben Israel, had omitted certain parts criticizing the Kabbalah and Talmud; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 762, n. 200; Geiger, *Melo ḥofnayim*, 5, n. 4; Barzilay, *Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo*, 99–100. Ruderman, however, has questioned the authenticity of the Karaite version published by Geiger; see David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 146–52.



By the time of the publication of *Sefer elim* in 1629, Zerah and Delmedigo had already parted ways. Later, Zerah would contact Menasseh Ben Israel (1604–1657) in Amsterdam about the publication of other Karaite works and Hebrew translations of Philo's works, and would by then have already acquired a precious copy of *Sefer elim*.<sup>33</sup> The heading of his *zemer* in the Vilna Siddur (p. 163) finds him writing poetry as late as 1643/4. As to the year of his death, several dates have been suggested; according to Simḥa Lutzki's (d. 1706) *Ner ṣaddiqim* (*The Candle of the Righteous*), he died in 1657/8 at the age of seventy-nine.<sup>34</sup>

Delmedigo's background at the University of Padua provides at least one interesting detail: he had attended the lectures of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), one of the first proponents of the heliocentric world-view after Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543).<sup>35</sup> Apparently, Galileo Galilei did not teach his ideas openly in Padua at the time, but through private studies, Delmedigo had adopted the heliocentric views being developed by contemporary scientists. *Sefer elim* is thus one of the first Jewish books that mention the Copernican model favorably.<sup>36</sup> The meeting between Delmedigo and the Lithuanian Karaites thus represents a symbolically significant turning point for this small community at the threshold of modernity. Karaites would soon face similar dilemmas as tradition-bound, rabbinic Jews everywhere in Europe: slowly but surely, scientists would challenge many medieval and religious ideas on the nature of the cosmos.<sup>37</sup> In one of his questions on astronomy,<sup>38</sup> Zerah himself refers to Copernicus as a groundbreaking inventor of a

---

33 Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 730, 1225–28.

34 *Ner ṣaddiqim* (a discussion on the split between Rabbanites and Karaites with biographical information on Karaite authors) is partly published in Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 1409–43; on Zerah, see pp. 1431–32. *Ner ṣaddiqim* is the second part of his larger work *Me'irat 'enayim* (*Illuminating the eyes*) discussing Karaite faith. Lutzki's work has been published by the Israeli Karaite community; see Simḥa Isaac ben Moses Lutzki, *Me'irat 'enayim*, ed. Yosef Algamil (Ashdod: Tif'eret Yosef, 2001/2). For a manuscript version of the work by Lutzki's own hand, see Ms. B 266 at the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg; Daniel Lasker, "The Life and Works of Simḥa Isaac Lutzki," in *Eastern European Karaites in the Last Generations*, eds. Daniel Lasker and Dan Shapira (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute/Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 41.

35 Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 42–43, 151.

36 Delmedigo describes the Copernican system in the fourth chapter of *Sefer elim*, known as *Gēḥurot ha-sheḥem*, although most of his exposition is dedicated to the *Almagest*; Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 152; Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth*, 70–73.

37 Both the Bible and the Talmud suppose an Earth-centered universe that in later Greco-Roman science developed into the Ptolemaic system. On the early modern Jewish reactions to the Copernican model, see Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth*.

38 *Sefer elim*, 27. As many as five of his twelve questions deal with astronomy; Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 97.

system that would overturn all earlier notions of astronomy. Nevertheless, as Lasker<sup>39</sup> has noted, “[t]he disintegration of medieval science does not seem to have bothered the Eastern European Karaites; they embraced it and continued propagating it at least into the nineteenth century.” But was Zerah—an avid student of Ptolemy (ca. 100–160 CE) and Maimonides (1136–1204), with their geocentric views of the world,<sup>40</sup> and also an owner of a copy of *Sefer elim*—truly aware of the revolutionary character of the Copernican model, and was he able to advocate such views?<sup>41</sup>

Zerah wrote, or planned to write, several literary works though they would ultimately remain unpublished or disappear. These works and their scope further illuminate the academically multifaceted nature of Zerah. One such work was Zerah’s commentary on Maimonides’s *More neḥukhim* (*Guide for the Perplexed*).<sup>42</sup> Its mere existence evidences Zerah’s interests in philosophical speculation. He was knowledgeable in many aspects of the Maimonidean tradition: in his fifth question dealing with Kabbalah, amulets, and magic in *Sefer elim*, he refers to the fourteenth-century commentary of Moses of Narbonne (ca. 1300–1362) on Maimonides’s *Guide*.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, there is nothing surprising about Zerah’s fascination with Maimonidean thought. This was typical of any *ḥakham kolel*,<sup>44</sup> and Karaite scholars of Poland-Lithuania in particular had even included his classical works in their curriculum.<sup>45</sup>

Zerah lived during a period when interest in the popularized versions of Kabbalah was becoming fashionable and soon characterized both rabbinic Jews and

---

39 Daniel Lasker, “Eastern European Karaite Attitudes to Modern Science,” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 10/1 (2010): 126.

40 For the Maimonidean understanding of the universe, drawn mostly from Ptolemy and documented in his *Mishne Tora*, see Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth*, 34–37.

41 Karaites continued to use Ptolemaic astronomy for centuries to come; Lasker, “Eastern European Karaite Attitudes,” 130–33. Like Barzilay (*Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo*, 73–74), Lasker adds that the true authorship of the questions in *Sefer elim* is not completely clear. Nevertheless, we know for sure that Zerah owned a copy of the book.

42 This commentary is available at the Ukrainian National Library (HC no. 371); Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 338.

43 *Sefer elim*, 22.

44 Tirosch-Rothschild (*Between Worlds*, 106) describes how the Italian Jewish Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon “founded his synthesis of reason and faith upon the thought of Maimonides.”

45 On Maimonides’s *Guide* and other works in East European Karaite curriculum, see Riikka Tuori and Tapani Harviainen, “Karaite and Rabbanite Education for Karaite Students: A List of Titles in the Firkovich collection (F 946, No. 12),” *Karaite Archives* 4 (2016): 40.

Karaites in Europe.<sup>46</sup> Inspired by his Kabbalistic readings, Zerah composed a Kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs, a work that is apparently no longer extant.<sup>47</sup> As mentioned above, he did promote the mystical work (*Ha-elef lekha*, “You may have the thousand”) of his late teacher Joseph Malinowski to the Dutch publisher Menasseh Ben Israel. Interest in various types of Kabbalistic ideas was typical of a *hakham kolel*: the quintessential *l’uomo universale*, Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon (Italy, 1470–1526) was a dedicated student of Kabbalah.<sup>48</sup> During his sojourn in Constantinople, Zerah probably acquired more tutoring on the topic, although the Karaites of Troki had their own instructors of Kabbalah, and some of them had studied the topic in Turkey.<sup>49</sup> In his fifth question on Kabbalah and occultism in *Sefer elim*, Zerah discusses the sefirotic system,<sup>50</sup> and as Fenton points out,<sup>51</sup> his description of each divine attribute (*sefira*) hidden within the totality of other *sefirot* shows that he had studied the *Pardes rimmonim* (*The Garden of Pomegranates*) of the Safedian Kabbalist Moses Cordovero (1522–1570).<sup>52</sup>

As most East European Karaites in the early modern period, Zerah was intensely involved in the study of Karaite classical works by his Byzantine prede-

---

46 On the popularization of Kabbalah among early modern Jews, see Roni Weinstein, *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization/Liverpool University Press, 2016). On the history of Karaite interests in Kabbalah, including East European Karaites, see Paul Fenton, “De quelques attitudes qaraïtes envers la Qabbale,” *Revue des études juives* CXLII/1–2 (1983): 13–14.

47 The commentary is mentioned in a letter of Mordecai Nathansohn, a merchant from Vilna, to the historian Isaak Markus Jost; see Mordecai Aaron Günzburg, *Deḡir: kolel kḡuṣat mikhtaḡim shonim, meliṣot, mishle musar ve-toldot anshe shem* (Vilna, 1864), 190–202. In his letter, Nathansohn describes his visit to the Karaites in Troki in 1829 and supplies a list of literary works in their possession.

48 Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, 41–42.

49 Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 732. Zerah himself speaks of being close to a group of Kabbalists; *Sefer elim*, 24.

50 *Sefer elim*, 21–24.

51 Fenton, “De quelques attitudes,” 13–14.

52 Incidentally, Delmedigo was among the first Jewish scholars to use Lurianic texts and concepts in his expositions of Kabbalah; Moshe Idel, “Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660,” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David Ruderman (New York-London: New York University Press, 1992), 354. While Delmedigo’s other major work, *Ta’alumat ḥokhma* (published in Basel in 1629–1631), contains Kabbalistic treatises, his “true” stances towards Kabbalah have been disputed. Barzilai (*Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 223–96) discusses extensively his ambivalence towards Kabbalah, seeing in Delmedigo a sceptic and rationalist. David Ruderman (*Jewish Thought*, 131–32), on the other hand, suggests a more nuanced look at his ambivalence as part of the *Zeitgeist*, when both occultism and science could co-exist in a scholar’s mind.

cessors. He assembled, for example, a collection of commentaries on the Psalms (1–72) by the Byzantine Karaite Aaron ben Joseph (ca. 1260–1320); this work is apparently no longer extant.<sup>53</sup> In his poetry, he embedded exegetical allusions studied from these works, and from the exegetical works of such rabbinic masters as Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167), which Lithuanian Karaites devotedly read and studied.<sup>54</sup> In his later years, Zerah planned to write a three-part work discussing the separation between Karaites and Rabbanites, but, unfortunately, passed away before he could ever complete the task.<sup>55</sup> This final, ultimately unrealized literary project displays Zerah's unwavering interest in the origins of the unresolved intra-Jewish conflict, as well as his high regard for his own heritage.

These three elements—familiarity in philosophical and Kabbalistic topics, a strong Karaite identity, and intellectual curiosity—will come into play in my reflections on Zerah's Hebrew poems.

### 3 Zerah ben Nathan: A Poet in the Periphery?

Although Troki developed into a major center of the Karaites in northeastern Europe (excluding the Crimean peninsula), its Karaite community was both geographically and mentally far from the major centers of Jewish Europe. Furthermore, in the eyes of the Jewish majority, they were marginalized as a suspicious sect of *minim*, heretics.<sup>56</sup> Existence on the periphery does, nevertheless, tend to foster a great deal of internal strength within such a community

<sup>53</sup> Nathansohn, *Deḇir*, 197.

<sup>54</sup> On medieval exegetical references in Zerah's poems, see Riikka Tuori, "The One Who Defeats the Power of the Stars: Medieval Exegetics in Polish-Lithuanian Karaite Poetry," in *Exegesis and Poetry in Medieval Karaite and Rabbanite Texts*, eds. Joachim Yeshaya and Elisabeth Hollender (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), 279–82.

<sup>55</sup> The names of the books were to be based on the biblical origin of his name, Zerah (Gen 38:28–30): 1. *זה יצא ראשונה* ("This came out first"), 2. *אשר על ידו חוט השני* ("On whose hand was a crimson thread"), and 3. *ויקרא את שמו זרח* ("He was named Zerah"); see Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 1432. Barzilai (Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo, 74) notes that the work was intended to reflect the internal conflicts of the Lithuanian community that divided Karaites from Ashkenazic Rabbanites.

<sup>56</sup> That the relationship between Rabbanites and Karaites was important for the latter appears, for example, in the letter of the Turkish Karaite Joseph ben Moses Maruli to Zerah, where Maruli expresses his wish not to disturb the delicate balance between the two groups, referring to Rabbanites as "our brothers": *והשנאה בין אחינו הרבנים*: "and so that the quarrel, dispute, and hate between [us and] our brothers the Rabbanites will not increase"; Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 1224.

against ostracizing forces. Poetry probably functioned as one of the tools Karaites of the time used to outline both their boundaries and identity.<sup>57</sup>

Zeraḥ wrote Hebrew poems with the ease and enthusiasm of an industrious pre-modern Jewish poet.<sup>58</sup> His repertoire includes both liturgical poems<sup>59</sup> and various types of paraliturgical hymns for weddings and festivals. As previously mentioned, several of his poems in *Sefer elim* even address his contemporary life circumstances and offer lavish praise on Delmedigo.<sup>60</sup> Some of his devout poems were published in Karaite works printed in the nineteenth century, including the two Karaite prayer books, one in Gozlow, Crimea (1836), and another in Vilna (1890–1892).<sup>61</sup> Two poems appear in *Teṭiḇ da'at* (*Produce knowledge*; Prov 15:2), a work on Karaite faith by Crimean Karaite Mordecai Sultansky (1772–1862).<sup>62</sup> In addition, Zeraḥ wrote many poems that have remained unpublished, some of them copied in manuscripts as late as in the early twentieth century.<sup>63</sup> The identification of Zeraḥ's poems is facilitated by his almost consistent

57 Similar questions of identity were relevant for Zeraḥ's early teacher, Isaac ben Abraham. Golda Akhiezer, for instance, asks, "Did he write this book [*Ḥizzuq emuna*] as a Karaite Jew for Karaites or as a Jew for all the Jews?" See Golda Akhiezer, "The Karaite Isaac ben Abraham of Troki and his Polemic against Rabbanites," in *Tradition, Heterodoxy and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 442.

58 See the index of his poems—published in print—in Israel Davidson, *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, vol. IV (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), 380.

59 For example, 'aqedot on the binding of Isaac with allusions to the Torah portion and mid-rashic literature; see the third volume of the Karaite *Siddur*, which contains two 'aqedot (אִקְדוֹת, p. 319, and אָנָּה אֵלֹהֵי רַם, p. 320). On this liturgical genre in Karaite Jewish use, particularly in Poland-Lithuania, see Riikka Tuori, "Āqēdōt: The Binding of Isaac in Early Modern Polish-Lithuanian Karaite Poetry," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 27 (2016): 81–103.

60 Zeraḥ's letters in *Sefer elim* contain following poems: מגילה בגילה (p. 3), יְהִי רְצוֹן וְחַפֵּץ (p. 3), אֵיד, אָבֹא בִלְבוּשׁ שֶׁק (p. 3–6), זִמְרָה (p. 6), מִיָּדִי אֲבִיר חֲכָמָה (p. 10), and אֵלֹהִים אֲנִי אֲדַרְשׁ (p. 39–40). For a concise description of the contents of these poems, see Barzilai, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 71–72.

61 The third volume of the Vilna *Siddur* contains one *seliḥa* (אֵלֵהִי וְחִלֵּיתִי, p. 317–318) by Zeraḥ. The fourth volume contains eight poems by him: *ḥibbur* (זֶד מִן הוֹד, p. 78), *seliḥa* (תַּפְתָּחוּ לִי שְׁעָרֵי), *zemer* for Havdalah (אֲשֶׁשׁ בְּכֹס יִשַׁע, pp. 119–20), two *zemirot* for the Day of the Trumpeting (זֶה יוֹם רֵאשִׁוֹן, pp. 121–22, and זֶה יוֹם רֵאשִׁוֹן, pp. 122–23), a *zemer* for the authorization of a Karaite religious leader (*ḥazzan*) (אֲזַמְרֵר בְּזִמְרָה, pp. 163–64), a *zemer* discussing divinity (אֵלֵהִים יֵד), *zemer* (זִמְרָה, pp. 173–74), and a *zemer* for weddings (אֲקָרָא אֶל עֲלִיָּין, p. 210).

62 Printed in 1858 in Gozlow (Eupatoria), Crimea: a private prayer אָדוֹן אֵלֵהִים, and אֵלֵהִים אֲנִי (pp. 128–30). Both of these poems had been published in the Karaite *Siddur* (Gozlow, 1836, vol. I, 78).

63 See, for example, Ms. Heb. 3795 (National Library of Israel, Jerusalem), with five poems: אֲדוֹנֵי (fol. 15a), אָנָּה אֵלֵהִי בִין (fol. 20a), הַלְלוּהָ אֲשִׁירָהּ לָךְ (fol. 24b), אֵלֵהִי בִין הַגִּי, (fol. 27b), and

use of acrostics containing his own name, with or without the patronym, and the occasional addition of the first-person pronoun.

Formally, most of Zerah's Hebrew poems, and his paraliturgical poems in particular, follow "Andalusian" aesthetics,<sup>64</sup> adapted from the style of Byzantine Karaite poets and medieval Sefardic poets, including Solomon Ibn Gabirol (ca. 1020–ca. 1057), Judah ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141), and Abraham Ibn Ezra. In addition, Zerah employed several other poetic techniques. In his abecedary poem in praise of Delmedigo, אולם אני אדרוש ("But as for me, I would seek"),<sup>65</sup> each word of the same line begins with the same letter. Another favorite technique of his was the use of *inclusio*, "return", so that the first and last line of the poem would contain almost identical wordings.<sup>66</sup> While the Hebrew of his religious poems is usually concise and somewhat conventional in their biblical and medieval Hebrew phraseology, the Hebrew of the secular poems in *Sefer elim* is more opaque: Abraham Geiger describes these poems as "geschnörkelte Sprache,"<sup>67</sup> and Barzilay similarly as "highly decorative."<sup>68</sup>

The vernacular of the Karaites was Turkic Karaim,<sup>69</sup> written in Hebrew script. Most Karaites certainly knew the Polish of their Christian environs, and some Yiddish of the Ashkenazic Jews.<sup>70</sup> During the sixteenth century, Karaites had begun to write more and more of their secular poetry in the vernacular, and Zerah wrote original poetry in Karaim as well as translated Karaim poems into Hebrew.<sup>71</sup> Clearly an enthusiast of poetry, he even translated the poetry of the Polish poet Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584) into Karaim.<sup>72</sup>

---

אשפל גבזה (fol. 50a). They have never appeared in print, nor are any poems in these manuscripts listed, for example, in Davidson's *Thesaurus*.

<sup>64</sup> For a brief introduction to Andalusian poetics among the Polish-Lithuanian Karaites, see Riikka Tuori, "Polish-Lithuanian Karaite Zemirot: Imitation only? A Review on a Marginal Genre," *Studia Orientalia* 114 (2013): 359–72.

<sup>65</sup> *Sefer elim*, 39–40.

<sup>66</sup> For examples, see the two poems below.

<sup>67</sup> Geiger, *Isaak Troki*, 44.

<sup>68</sup> Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> On this Turkic language which belongs to the north-western Kipchak group, see Dan Shapira, "The Turkic Languages and Literatures of the East European Karaites," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 657–707.

<sup>70</sup> According to Kizilov, Zerah's Karaim-language writings were later published in the journal *Karaj Awazy* by Aleksander Mardkiewicz (1875–1944); see Mikhail Kizilov, *The Sons of the Scripture: The Karaites in Poland and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 145.

<sup>71</sup> Mikhail Kizilov, *The Karaites of Galicia* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009), 160–65; Golda Akhiezer and Dan Shapira, "Qara'im be-liṭa u-be-vohlin-galiṣya 'ad ham-me'a ha-yod-ḥet," *Pe'amim* 89 (2001): 39.

Jacob Mann found one of his Hebrew translations from Karaim intriguing enough to translate parts of it in his *Texts and Studies*.<sup>73</sup> The original author of the poem מאסר העוף ותפישתו (“The imprisonment of the bird and its apprehension”) was Zerah’s beloved teacher, Joseph ben Mordecai Malinowski. Biting in tone, it deplores the low spiritual and intellectual state of the Troki community. The poem, as follows, is partially reproduced from Mann’s copy of the Hebrew poem, which I have vocalized and translated:

משבילינו הן נפטר / חכמי הדור הם נעדרו  
 נשארו דור רע ומתעקש / חורש רעה ומתנקש  
 איננו איש בקהלינו / שם לב תורת מהללנו  
 יראת האל נשלל גם סר / מעשה הטוב במאד נחסר  
 אין שומע אל תוכחות / איש משתוקק דברי צחות  
 מתהלל כל עם מדתו / לא ישים לב אל רעתו  
 אי כבוד הוד אל איש תמים / אף אין חרפה אל איש דמים  
 אם תאמר לו דברי מוסר / יחר אפו אל איש טפסר

Our intelligent ones have passed away,  
 And the wise ones of the ages have departed.  
 An evil and obstinate generation remains,  
 Devising evil and laying snares.<sup>74</sup>  
 Not one amidst our congregation  
 Contemplates the law of our Praised one.  
 The fear of God has been rejected and deterred –  
 There is an exceeding lack of good deeds.  
 No one heeds exhortations,  
 No one yearns for the pure words.  
 The whole nation boasts of itself yet  
 Does not consider its own wickedness.  
 A virtuous man receives no respect,  
 While there is no shame for a murderer.  
 If you utter against him words of reproof,  
 His anger will break out against the dignified.

These lines to some extent seem to express the actual opinions and frustrations of both poet and translator. According to Mann,<sup>75</sup> Malinowski had written the poem after facing (unspecified) hard times and discontent in Troki, which caused him to leave the community and move south to Łuck, Volhynia. Later, at the time of the translation, Zerah may have come to share the grim views of his teacher.

<sup>72</sup> Mikhail Kizilov, *The Sons of the Scripture*, 412.

<sup>73</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 731, 1228–31, copied from Ms. Kahana I, fols. 108b–109b.

<sup>74</sup> 1 Sam 28:9.

<sup>75</sup> Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 719–20.

While grievances over immorality and the decline of the present generation are not original themes in pre-modern Hebrew poetry, similar complaints over the lack of spirituality and academic decline pervade Zerah's poems. His *zemer* אשא בכוס ישע ("I will raise the cup of salvation") for Havdalah<sup>76</sup> refers to a similarly sorry state of affairs (verses 3–4, and 14):

הוֹדֶה וְעוֹ יָדֶךָ—מִי הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכִּיל  
זֶי אֹר דְּבָרֶיךָ—חֲשָׁכוּ לְעֵינֵינוּ

חֲקִרְיוֹ הֲלֵא אֶפְסוּ—טָסוּ לְקִנְיָהֶם  
יִדְעִיו בְּקִבְרֵיהֶם—אוֹת הִיא לְעֵינֵינוּ

....

בֵּינָה הִגִּיג הַדֵּל—נִגְרָשׁ וְגַם נִבְדָּל  
טָרֹד וְהַמְדִּלְדֵּל—תּוֹד עִם עֲדֵתֵנוּ

Your majesty and the might of Your hand—who could comprehend them?  
The illuminating light of Your words has darkened before our eyes.

Its scholars—aren't they gone? They flew to their nests!  
The knowledgeable ones are in their graves. May this be a sign to our eyes!

...

Consider the lament of the deprived, expelled, and divided,  
Troubled and impoverished amidst the people of our congregation.

The last line indicates that the Karaites in Troki were struggling not only with poverty and internal friction, but also with external discrimination. The word "divided" (Heb. נִבְדָּל) may even be a reference to the division between the Ashkenazic Jewish community and the Karaites in the town of Troki.

While Zerah sometimes turns a critical eye upon his own community, his Karaite identity often serves as a cause for celebration. In the same poem for Havdalah, he addresses his community as "bearers of the yoke" of the Torah. This epithet refers to the Karaite idea of tradition as *sebel ha-yerushsha* ("the yoke of inheritance"):<sup>77</sup>

סוֹבְלֵי לַעוֹל דָּתֶךָ—עוֹרְגִים בְּאֵלִים  
הַקֵּל לְעַבְדוּתָם—הַכֶּרֶת לְמוֹנֵינוּ

The bearers of the yoke of Your Law yearn like harts,<sup>78</sup>  
Make their servitude lighter; destroy our oppressors!

<sup>76</sup> Vilna *Siddur*, vol. IV, 119–20.

<sup>77</sup> On the yoke of tradition in medieval Karaite sources, see, e.g., Fred Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 158–82.

<sup>78</sup> Ps 42:2.



Having authored a commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, it is unsurprising that Zerah employs numerous medieval philosophical concepts in his poems, most likely inspired by his advanced readings of philosophical and exegetical works. His *zemer* אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה יסוד עולם (“The Lord is the foundation of the world”)<sup>79</sup> discusses the essence of divinity, drawing on vocabulary familiar to philosophical discussions:

ברוח פיו אֱלֹהִיִּתָּךְ  
בְּלִי יֵשֶׁג בְּמַהוּתָּךְ  
ובל יובן מְצִיאוּתָּךְ  
נַחֲנִי נָא מִסְלָלָתְךָ

In the breath of his mouth<sup>80</sup> Your divinity (flows).<sup>81</sup>

Your essence is unreachable.

Your existence cannot be understood.

Please, lead me on Your path.

In rhyming “divinity” (אֱלֹהִיּוּת), “essence” (מְהוּת), and “existence” (מְצִיאוּת), the poem alludes to the medieval Jewish ideas of divinity, familiar from the principles of faith of Maimonides and of earlier Karaite scholars,<sup>82</sup> and from such popular Jewish poems as יגדל אֱלֹהִים חַי (“Magnify, O living God”) and אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם (“Master of the Universe”), well known and cherished among the Karaites.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to his approach to rudimentary philosophical concepts, Zerah appears to be more reticent about openly using Kabbalistic ideas in his poetry, though he occasionally discusses “veiled secrets” and the inner meanings of Jewish holidays. Then again, Kabbalistic allusions are not easy to identify due to their secretive nature and embeddedness in conventional jargon, so Zerah, a veritable student of Kabbalah, may have camouflaged the mystical undertones of his poems. Delmedigo had cautioned him on the dangers of Kabbalah,<sup>84</sup> and Zerah himself pondered upon the effects of practical Kabbalah in his question to

<sup>79</sup> Vilna *Siddur*, vol. IV, 173–74.

<sup>80</sup> Job 15:30.

<sup>81</sup> On the term אֱלֹהִיּוּת, see Jacob Klatzkin, *Thesaurus Philosophicus linguae hebraicae et veteris et recentioris auctore* (Berlin: Eshkol, 1928), 23.

<sup>82</sup> For a Byzantine Karaite version of the principles of faith, see Elijah Bashyatchi, *Adderet Eliyyahu* (Constantinople, 1532), 55a–60a. A poem on the principles by Judah ben Aaron, the father of Delmedigo’s Karaite correspondent Josiah ben Judah, see Riikka Tuori, “The Ten Principles of Karaite Faith in a Seventeenth-Century Hebrew Poem from Troki,” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 13 (2016): 79–98.

<sup>83</sup> Both rabbinic *piyyuṭim* are part of the Karaite ritual; Vilna *Siddur*, vol. II, 252; vol. IV, 74.

<sup>84</sup> Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo*, 242.

Delmedigo.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps echoing this attitude, the *zemer* for the Day of the Trumpeting (זה יום ראשון אל התשובה) “This is the first day towards repentance”<sup>86</sup> exhorts the fellow Karaites as follows:

בְּקֶצֶת סֹדוֹ אֶטִּיף מִזֶּמֶר  
עֶבֶד הָאֵל בְּמֵאֵד נִזְהָר

Only a little of its secret I shall convey:  
The servant of God should be very cautious!<sup>87</sup>

Overall, there is a rich variety of philosophical, exegetical, and even a few mystical allusions in Zerah’s poems, as well as statements of pride in Karaite faith. However, to some extent, his poems reflect some degree of frustration, probably shared with the elite members of his community in Lithuania, with the moral and intellectual ineptitude of his immediate surroundings. His poems—as well as his biographical data—witness a man yearning to exceed the restricting borders of his community; perhaps he saw himself as “deprived” and “exiled,” when he experienced difficulties obtaining new books or seeking out worthy interlocutors in Troki. As he had not yet found an intellectual home, life in Troki became a target of criticism that sometimes turned bitter. Poetry thus offered a source of comfort for Zerah, through which medium he could relieve the pressure from his conflicting emotions towards contemporary Karaite life and culture, and, at the same time, express his commitment to Karaite Judaism.

## 4 Zerah ben Nathan: Two New Poems

Ms. Heb. 3795, held at the National Library of Israel,<sup>88</sup> contains five poems by Zerah.<sup>89</sup> Yehuda Bizikovich<sup>90</sup> copied the manuscript in 1902/3 from an older

<sup>85</sup> Zerah makes a distinction between practical Kabbalah and witchcraft when asking Delmedigo about the miracle-working boy in Podolia; *Sefer elim*, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Vilna *Siddur*, vol. IV, 121–22.

<sup>87</sup> Ps 19:12.

<sup>88</sup> Microfilm 8<sup>o</sup> B601 at the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. The manuscript is entitled מֵאֶסֶף הַשֵּׁנִי: יְלֻקוֹת דְּרָשׁוֹת פִּיּוּטִים, תְּפִילּוֹת וְתוֹכַחוֹת מוֹסֵר שֶׁל קְרָאִי טְרוֹקִי (“The second collection: an assortment of sermons, *piyyuṭim*, prayers, and moral admonishments of the Karaites of Troki”). The manuscript is identical to Ms. Kahana II mentioned by Jacob Mann and named after its initial owner in Tel Aviv, Abraham Kahana (1874–1946); see Mann, *Texts and Studies*, 554, n. 7.

<sup>89</sup> The three poems not published here are located on folios 15a, 15b, and 20ab.

manuscript, originally assembled in 1775. To the best of my knowledge, none of these poems has ever appeared in print. The two poems published and translated here—one *baqqasha* and one *zemer* for Purim—are solemn in tone and depict the life of the Karaite community.

#### 4.1 Baqqasha “Remember, God, ancestral merits”

In the nine-verse *baqqasha* זכור האל זכות אבות (“Remember, God, ancestral merits”),<sup>91</sup> written in the quantitative meter *ha-merubbe*, the poet yearns for divine forgiveness, drawing his inspiration from Deut 9:27,<sup>92</sup> a verse that is repeated in both the first and the last verse of the poem. The *baqqasha* laments the decline of the generations, with the only hope preserved in the virtuous examples of the ancestors, expressed in the familiar Jewish concept of זכות אבות (“ancestral merit”). Despite the shortcomings of his contemporaries, the poet hopes that God will overlook their sins, as they are distraught and impoverished in exile. The poem evokes three personae typical of pre-modern religious Hebrew poetry: God and Israel, and generic antagonists who scheme to eradicate the Jews. Using medieval Hebrew concepts and linguistic elements like “divinity” (אֱלֹהִים) and intensifiers like “utterly” (בְּתַכְלִית), the poem evidences Zerah’s literary links to post-biblical Jewish literature.

Scansion: ^ - - - / ^ - - - / ^ - - (*ha-merubbe*)

Acrostic: זרח בר נתן חזק ואמץ Zerah ben rabbi Nathan, be strong and courageous

Preface: עוד להחכם הנ”ל; Another one by the scholar mentioned above.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Bizikovich, or Bezikowicz, worked as a *religious leader* (*hazzan*) in Troki during 1901–1905. Together with Yitshak-Boaz Firkovich, he published a collection of Karaite poetry, *Tehillot yiš-  
ra’el, tosafot li-tfillot ha-qara’im* (Berditshev: Sheftel, 1909).

<sup>91</sup> Fol. 15b.

<sup>92</sup> זָכֹר לַעֲבָדֶיךָ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב אֶל-תִּפְּן אֶל-קִשֵׁי הָעַם הַזֶּה וְאַל-רְשָׁעוֹ וְאַל-חַטָּאתוֹ; “Give thought to Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and pay no heed to the stubbornness of this people, its wickedness, and its sinfulness.”

<sup>93</sup> The poem lacks a more detailed preface because it was copied after two earlier poems by Zerah.

1. זְכוֹר הָאֵל זְכוֹת אֲבוֹת לַעֲמֹד / וְאַל תִּפֶּן לַחַטָּאתָם וְרָשָׁעַם
2. רְאֵה עֲנִיִּים וְעַמְלָם רַב בְּגָלוֹת / בְּעוֹל דִּלּוֹת וְשֹׂא לָהֶם לַפְשָׁעַם
3. חֲזוּה הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר גָּבְרוּ גְדוּדִים / לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּלִי תִזְכוֹר לְגִזְעָם
4. בְּלִי חֶסֶד בְּלִי חֲמִלָה בְּתַכְלִית / עַל נַפְשָׁם רְכוּשָׁם<sup>94</sup> וּבִצְעָם
5. רְצוּנָם בּוֹא עָלֵי עֲמֹד שְׂאֵרִית / פְּלִטָּה נִמְצְאָה הַשְׁמֵד לְנִצָּחָם
6. נִחֲוֶז אֹתָם עַד־ הַשְׁמָדָם עַד / וְיָדְעוּ כִּי בְיָדְךָ יֵשׁ לְנִצָּחָם
7. נָקוּם נִקְמַת עֲבָדֶיךָ לְמַעַן / אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיִגְלֶה בִּישָׁעַם
8. חֲקוֹר וְעַקְתָּ<sup>95</sup> קִשּׁוּב אֲנָקַת מַדְבָּא / וּמִצְטַעַר לְצָרָתָם וּפִצְעָם
9. וְכָל אִישׁ מַעְלָה צָרַת יְהוּדִים / עָלֵי נַפְשׁוֹ וְאַל תִּפֶּן לַרָשָׁעַם

1. Remember, God, the ancestral merits<sup>97</sup> of Your people,  
And pay no heed to their sin and wickedness.<sup>98</sup>
2. Observe how their poverty and struggle in exile are immense  
Under the yoke of destitution, and lift away their sin.
3. See how in our day the troops against Israel have grown,  
(As) You<sup>99</sup> have not remembered their stem.<sup>100</sup>
4. Utterly without mercy and compassion  
For their life, their property, and their profit.
5. Their<sup>101</sup> wish is to rise against Your nation, the remnant  
Survivors (still) remaining—to destroy them for good.
6. Break them until they are forever demolished,  
And they will learn that it is in Your hand to defeat them.
7. Take vengeance for Your servants for the sake of  
Your divinity, and may He<sup>102</sup> reveal Himself through their salvation!
8. Heed the cry and hear the sigh of the oppressed,  
The ones mourning over their troubles and wounds,
9. And of every person who bears the misfortune of the Jews upon his soul,  
And pay no heed to their sin and wickedness!<sup>103</sup>

<sup>94</sup> The meter would require one *tenu'a*, one *yated*, and one *tenu'a*, but *וּבִצְעָם* has only one *yated* and one *tenu'a*. For some reason, one *tenu'a* between *רְכוּשָׁם* and *וּבִצְעָם* is lacking.

<sup>95</sup> The noun is in *status constructus* but followed by a verb instead of a noun.

<sup>96</sup> Or, *מַדְבָּא*, “the oppressor”? The meaning of the line is not completely clear.

<sup>97</sup> Here, *זְכוֹת אֲבוֹת* functions as a defense of the shortcomings of contemporary generations.

<sup>98</sup> Deut 9:27.

<sup>99</sup> Referring to the Jews, rather than to God?

<sup>100</sup> An allusion to the Messiah (cf. Isa 11:1: “But a shoot shall come out of the stump (or: stem) of Jesse (*מִגֵּזַע יֵשׁוּעַ*), a twig shall sprout from his roots”)?

<sup>101</sup> The poem does not elaborate further on the nature of these enemies.

<sup>102</sup> Although “divinity” is a feminine noun, the verb is in masculine—perhaps in reference to the Messiah, rather than to God? As is typical for pre-modern Hebrew poetry, the gender of suffixes and personal pronouns often do not agree.

<sup>103</sup> Deut 9:27.

## 4.2 Zemer “I, the low and insignificant one”

The second poem, אשפל ונבזה (“I, the low and insignificant one”),<sup>104</sup> is a *zemer* for Purim, written in a non-classical quantitative meter.<sup>105</sup> It employs a similar technique of citing the Bible as the poem above, with the phrase “the Lord has worked wonders” (הַפְּלֵא ה')<sup>106</sup> repeated both at the beginning and at the end of the poem. Unlike the previous poem, Bizikovich has vocalized the poem in the manuscript.

The poem begins by declaring to tell “the tale of Purim.” This tale is not, however, told in a straightforward manner, but riddled with puns, poetic epithets, and certain keywords (“cry,” “wailing,” “haters”) that allude to the protagonists or events of the Book of Esther. When referring to Mordecai, the poem quotes the verse from the Book of Genesis that recounts the characteristics of the tribe of Mordecai, Benjamin (“a wolf that ravens”). Haman and his associates are cursed as haters and enemies, and worshippers of “idols” (עֹבְדֵי לְסִמָּל) who will be destroyed.

Scansion: – – ^ – – / – – ^ – – / – – ^ – – / – – ^ – – (a non-classical meter of *yatedot* and *tenu'ot*)

Acrostic: ואמץ; I am Zerah, be strong and courageous

Preface: גם זה הזמר להחכם הגדול מורהר' זרח נב"ת בכ"מ נתן הזקן תנצב"ה This is also a *zemer* for Purim by the great scholar, our teacher and rabbi Zerah, may his soul reside in Eden, the son of our honored teacher, Nathan the elder, may his soul be bound in the bundle of life.

1. אֲשַׁפֵּל וְנִבְזֶה / אֶטִּיף וְאֶזֶה / סַפּוֹר לְיוֹם זֶה / הַפְּלִיא ה'
  2. נִבָּא בְּחֵיר יְה' / אֶל עַם שְׁבוּיָה / אֶרְץ נִשְׁיָה / תּוֹדָה גּוֹי מְעִנִי
  3. יֵאָכֵל זָאֵב עֵד / בְּקֹר וְסִיעֵד / לְבוֹ וְיַעֲד / עֶרֶב יַעֲצִי<sup>107</sup>
  4. זָבַד אֱלֹהִים / הָדָר גְּבוּהִים / הַגְּדִיל נְגוּהִים / הַסִּיר עֲנִי
  5. רָאָה בְּעֵינַי / אֶל חַי וְקַיִם / לַהֲיוֹת בְּתוֹךְ יָם / לִפְנֵי גְאוּנִי
  6. חוֹמַל וְגוֹמַל / עָמַל וְאָמַל / עוֹבְדֵי לְסִמָּל / הַכְרִית לַעֲנִי
  7. חֲשָׁב וְקִיִּים / זָמַם וְסִיִּים / קִצֹּף וְאִיִּים / שׁוֹנְאֵי וְשׁוֹטְנֵי
  8. זָכַר וְעָקָה / פָּקַד אֲנִיקָה / צִיר מֶר וּפּוֹקָה / מִסַּפֵּד אֲמוֹנִי
  9. קָבַל לְקוֹל רָם / נוֹרָא בְּמִקְדָּשׁ<sup>108</sup> / תַּעֲתִיר לְגִדְרָם / אֶל תַּחֲנוּנִי
  10. אֲמִץ לְלֵב עַם / יַעֲוֶיף בְּרָעַם / תִּסְרִיף לְזַעַם / הַפְּלִיא ה'
- ככתוב וקוי ה' יחליפו כח יעלו אבר כנשרים ירצו ולא ייגעו ילכו ולא ייעפו

<sup>104</sup> Fol. 50ab.

<sup>105</sup> Repeating two *tenu'ot*, one *yated*, and one *tenu'a* four times per verse.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Deut 28:59.

<sup>107</sup> For some reason, the rhyme here is -*say*, instead of the regular -*nay*.

<sup>108</sup> This word does not take part in the internal rhyme of the line (רם).

1. I, the low and insignificant one,<sup>109</sup> shall preach and speak<sup>110</sup> about the story of the day when the Lord worked wonders.<sup>111</sup>
2. The Lord's chosen one<sup>112</sup> prophesied for the captive nation (in) the land of forgetfulness,<sup>113</sup> amidst the people of my persecutors.
3. The wolf devours its prey in the morning<sup>114</sup> and strengthens (its) heart,<sup>115</sup> and in the evening he gathers those who plot (evil) against me.<sup>116</sup>
4. God has endowed (me): He, who lives on high, increased brightness (and) removed my clouds.
5. The living and eternal Lord saw their poverty, their being (ensnared) within the sea raging before me.<sup>117</sup>
6. The One who forgives and rewards those who toil and suffer: He destroyed the worshippers of idols<sup>118</sup> before my eyes!
7. He<sup>119</sup> planned and fulfilled, devised and finalized, raged against and threatened those who hate me and accuse me.<sup>120</sup>

**109** Cf. Mal 2:9: "And I, in turn, have made you despicable and vile (נְבוֹזִים וְשִׁפְלִים) in the eyes of all the people, because you disregard My ways and show partiality in your rulings."

**110** In his exegetical work *Rabbenu Baḥya*, the Spanish exegete Baḥya ben Asher (1255–1340) uses the same phrase אֲשִׁי וְאֶחָד ("I will preach and speak"); cf. משה מדין (1255–1340) "In this way will I preach and speak about the secrets of the man Moses, the prime of his time"; Baḥya ben Asher, *Midrash Rabbenu Baḥya* (Warsaw, 1879), 2. East European Karaites studied the commentaries of Baḥya ben Asher, including his *Kad ha-qemaḥ* ("The Jar of Flour") and other commentaries in their curricula; see Tuori and Harviainen, "Karaite and Rabbanite," 44.

**111** Cf. Deut 28:59.

**112** According to early midrashim on Esther (*Esther Rabba* 6:2) Mordecai was equivalent to Moses, God's chosen one, in his generation: משה בדורו... כמשה בדורו. משה, His chosen one ("That learned man, Mordecai, was considered in his generation like Moses... Moses, His chosen one").

**113** Ps 88:13, usually alluding to the land of the dead, or to the land of Israel, but here apparently referring to Persia, where the events leading to Purim occurred ("amidst the people of my persecutors").

**114** Gen 49:27: בִּנְיָמִן זֶאֱבִי יִטְרֹף בִּבְקֶר יֹאכֵל עַד וְלַעֲרֵב יִחְלַק שָׁלָל; "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf: in the morning he consumes the foe, and in the evening he divides the spoil." Mordecai belonged to the tribe of Benjamin (Esth 2:5).

**115** Ps 104:15.

**116** The last part of the line is opaque, and the translation does probably not capture the original meaning of the poet. Perhaps the reference is to Mordecai planning to thwart Haman's murderous plans.

**117** Referring to the sea as a place of trouble in the biblical history, for example, during the parting of the Sea of Reeds in the Book of Exodus.

**118** עֹבְדֵי לְטָמֵל, lit. worshippers of "symbols," pagans, referring to Haman and his companions in Persia. The more familiar phrase would obviously be עֹבְדֵי כּוֹכָבִים, "the worshippers of stars."

**119** God.

**120** Cf. Esth 9:1: אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְטוּ הַיְּהוּדִים הֵמָּה בְּשָׁנָאֵיהֶם; "And the Jews got their haters in their power."

8. He<sup>121</sup> remembered (their) cry and recalled (their) call, the bitter pain and stumbling, the wailing of my faithful ones.<sup>122</sup>

9. He received (them) with a loud voice,<sup>123</sup> the Awesome in (His) sanctuary: You will pay their vows<sup>124</sup> for the sake of my pleas.

10. Strengthen the heart of the people flying in thunder! Remove the anger of the Lord who has worked wonders!<sup>125</sup>

As is written: *But they who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength as eagles grow new plumes; they shall run and not grow weary; they shall march, and not grow faint* (Isa 40:31).

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Zerah ben Nathan, a poet and a scholar who lived at the outskirts of the Jewish world, was one of the most famous Karaites of his time. His name is mentioned, albeit fleetingly, in studies on the scientific progress made by early modern Jews. Contemporary sources and his own literary works conjure the image of an ardent (and occasionally distressed) man of faith and science, philosophy and mysticism. Many of his poems, intended for a Karaite audience, survive in manuscripts and in printed editions of Karaite prayer books. These poems offer a glimpse into the mindset of the local Karaite community, witnessing various cultural connections between the Jewish societies of the time, from the Karaite and Ashkenazic communities of Eastern Europe to various Jewish communities in Italy and Turkey. An enthusiast of the sacred language and an amateur philosopher, Zerah habitually expressed his scholarly insights in his poems and was greatly committed to his Karaite heritage. While also well aware of new ideas of astronomy that threatened the contemporary theological order, Zerah remained steadfast in his religious convictions: he was a student of science but not a scientist, nor was he a rebel like Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) a few decades later. Already middle-aged during his time in Constantinople, Zerah was afforded the opportunity to indulge his curiosities in his correspondence with Delmedigo, but this exchange may also have left him with a perpetual longing for a

---

**121** God.

**122** After Haman's plans of destruction, Mordecai and the Jews were crying, mourning, weeping, fasting and wailing; Esth 4:1–3.

**123** Cf. Deut 27:14, “The Levites shall then proclaim in a loud voice (קול רם) to all the people of Israel.” The following verse (Deut 27:15) lists cursed men: אָרִיר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל... וּמַסֵּכָה, “Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image,” in reference to Haman, the cursed man.

**124** Cf. Job 22:27.

**125** Cf. Deut 28:59.

more permanent intellectual home. Whether or not this was the case, Zerah's thinking flirted with the borders that divided the Middle Ages from modernity, the Ashkenazim from the Sefardim, and the Rabbanites from the Karaites. To some degree, as expressed even by his Rabbanite correspondent, Delmedigo, Zerah should be regarded as a Karaite version of the ideal Jewish scholar, a *ḥakham kolel*.



